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A WILD PARADISE FOUND

The second half of the summer was spent in more futile chasings around Scotland, looking for my new ideal home, and by the end of it I had decided to return to Spain. Then, though, something strange happened. I was driving through Perth after visiting a loyal reader in the town when I spied a big colourful notice in the window of Bidwells, the estate agents: Hideaways In Scotland. The street was clogged with cars, with nowhere to park, and I was about to carry on when a big car in front of me signalled to leave. I stopped, flashed my lights to let it out, then pulled into the gap and marched in for the brochure. I camped near Douglas Water and saw that the brochure had several promising properties.

Next day I checked a sawmill on the River Nith but it was too near other buildings, and a small cottage near Selkirk which could have suited me if it had not already been sold. I motored on eastwards to look at a weirdly- named Ropelaw Farmhouse in the middle of the 10,000-acre Craik Forest near Hawick, which was described as the 'ultimate hideaway'. It looked to be so from the photo and, at offers over £35,000, seemed to be a very good buy in an idyllic spot. I finally reached the remote Forestry Commission gate. The instructions said that one had to drive 5.6 miles down the forestry track to find the farmhouse but the gate was padlocked! It was now pouring with rain so I was damned if I was going to walk it and back.

However, I well knew the habits of FC rangers. Sure enough, there was a key under a rock by the side of the gate. I used it, put the key back where I'd found it and began driving down a seemingly endless gravelly track. To my surprise, I saw a Rolls Royce driving towards me! I pulled into a hardcore layby and waved frantically, hoping to stop the driver and tell him to leave the key for me. But he just waved back airily, barely glancing at me, and went on. Oh hell, he's probably bought the place already, I thought, but decided that I may as well take a look at it anyway and drove the 5.6 miles. I found no left turnings as stated on the route, so went on, still found no turnings so went back, counted the two miles I'd overshot and looked more carefully. I then found, rather than a turning, a tiny weed-covered

two-wheel track forking to the left. It was muddy and soaking wet and old Caballo could easily get stuck so I backed down it a few yards. The farmhouse was said to be two hundred yards down the track. I marched on and on and after some five hundred yards felt like I must be on the wrong track. I was about to turn back when I spotted a chimney through the trees. I hiked on down.

What a fantastic place! It was huge, three-bedroomed farmhouse, in excellent order, with mains electricity and septic tank drainage laid on, and with its own water supply. There was a huge byre to the side and a separate garage/workshop, both in good condition. To the front of the 3 1/2 acres ran a burn with salmon and sea trout spawning pools, 160 yards of which belonged to the property, and the whole view beyond was of supernal hen harrier-type unplanted pastureland stretching to the next section of forest on the horizon. Again, quite fabulous. I looked through the windows and saw stacks of nice furniture, good quality carpets and curtains, and even a Rayburn. In the kitchen I could see racks of crockery, cutlery laid out, an ironing board and an iron. Crikey, I could just move in! Without thinking, I put my hand on the front door and made the Wildernesse prayer: 'If you want me here, help me. I will love and look after you if you will love and look after me.'

I felt that living here would be a totally new experience, new terrain, new wildlife. No eagles but surely I'd trekked enough on them? Maybe I'd give up my bondage to the king of birds and get down to serious writing, maybe some memoirs. I very much wanted to camp by the place but in the continuing downpour was afraid the track might wash out and Caballo would get stuck, six miles from the nearest road. I drove back to the gate but the key had gone - the Roller driver must have taken it! In vain I searched, scratched, scabbled the ground under and around the rock but it was gone. I was stuck behind the barrier all night. I couldn't lift the gate off its hinges as the hangers were reversed. I could have axed through a side gate but destroying government property could mean big trouble and would ensure that I didn't get the farmhouse. Oh well, camp here for the night, then, I thought. Soaked almost to the skin, I laid out my clothes to dry a little, had a few drams, made a meal and went to sleep, hoping some forester would come through tomorrow.

Not until ten o'clock next morning did a battered jalopy turn up and a man got out to walk his greyhound. He didn't have a key either but told me I could just drive out of the forest by going back to the open end at Craik village. I was getting short of petrol so I asked how far it was. He said it was fifteen miles but that it was a complicated route and that many folk had got lost in Craik Forest. In the end he postponed walking his dog, apart from giving it a brief run, seized his own 4-gallon can of petrol and guided me all the way to Craik. I then had to drive him back to his van, from where he guided me to Hawick and a petrol station. He would take no reward but when he said he had won many shooting competitions and wanted to be a deer stalker, I said I'd write and recommend him to Louis Stewart MBE, head of the Red Deer Commission whom I knew, which I later did.

That very day I rang Bidwells to say that I definitely wanted to buy the farmhouse. They told me that there had already been two closing dates but that no-one had come up with the money. I dashed south to complete some business with my publisher, make more videos, get Caballo through his MOT, sort out tax affairs with my accountant and conduct negotiations by telephone, which took almost three weeks.

When I first entered the farmhouse with the estate factor I was delighted to find that the electricity and water systems were working perfectly and that there was far more useful gear in the house than I had seen through the windows. The biggest surprise came when he told me that everything in the house was owned by the previous tenant, the world-famous yachtsman Chay Blyth. The good news continued when I went to the Scottish Power office in Galashiels and, on asking how much it would cost me to help maintain the five miles of private line that went to the house, was told that it would cost nothing at all. It was their responsibility to keep the line in good repair, and if a pole fell down they would be out in 24 hours to put up a new one. My only responsibilities were the meter and wiring inside the house. What was more, Chay Blyth had paid up to date, and they even gave me his phone number, in Petersfield, Hampshire, where he was working for British Steel. At the Forestry Commission office in Hawick I was told there would be no tree extractions around me for at least five years and at the postal sorting office in the same town, from where I'd hoped to collect my mail, I was told that there was a daily delivery right to the house, which would clearly be the most isolated place I had ever lived. Everything was looking better and better.

I will never forget the day of the handover at the farmhouse when I met Chay Blyth. I had already spoken to him by phone and he said he'd received a letter from the Estate stating that once he and I had agreed what gear he was taking and what he was leaving, I could move in, as 'the missives would be concluded'. I expressed the hope that he would bring a big van as I was a writer and didn't want removal men coming in again and again over a long period. He said he understood. We met – he was shorter than I expected and had white hair – and shook hands at the top of the 600-yard track. It was not what I'd call a handshake at all and I thought 'This is the hand that rowed the Atlantic!' He wanted to drive me down to the house in his car but I needed to see if Caballo could make it, which he did, easily. After Chay had showed me around – more fine furniture than ever, wardrobes, chests of drawers, cocktail cabinet, folding desk, the lot – I said 'Well, what do you want to take and what leave? I thought you'd come with a big van?'

'Oh, I don't really want to take anything!' he replied. He reached out and picked up two small framed photos of himself in some winning water polo team and added, 'I'll just have these'. And that really was all he wanted.

Now came the tricky bit. There must have been £2,000 worth of gear in the house. We went out into the garden and I asked how much he wanted for what

he was leaving. He muttered something about the storage heaters being worth the most. I was ready to go up to £800 but found myself saying 'How about £400?' He said, without a pause, 'Make it £500 and we have a deal.' I have never written a cheque so fast. I needed to buy nothing at all. I could just move in, into total luxury.

After Chay left, I sank to my knees inside the house, hardly able to believe the long search was over, and thanked the Great Spirit. I knew it was mine now. I'd never owned a brick before so this was the first home I had ever owned, and I was coming up to be an old age pensioner. I went to Caballo, where my most needed belongings still were, wrote the biggest cheque of my life, for £35,350, drove to Hawick and posted it to my lawyer in Edinburgh fast, before I changed my mind and did a bunk to the Yukon! I moved in on 20 October, the very day, twenty two years before, on which my Scottish odyssey began, when I landed in Scotland from Canada to find a new wild home and hiked into Camusfearna, Gavin Maxwell's home.

I had a lot of fast work ahead to prepare for winter. The track in was bow-shaped and clumps of thick rushes threatened to knock off Caballo's sump, so I hired a strimmer to cut them and spaded off the worst rocky bits. I gathered sacks of shale and rubble from the shores of the forest lochs, spread them over the marshy bits and used Caballo's wheels like a steamroller to make his own 'road'. To ensure my water supply I drove to Clovenfords to buy a huge black 320-gallon tank which had been used to ferry orange juice in bulk from Israel. It dwarfed Caballo but somehow the store manager and I got it strapped to his roof. As we drove back through Selkirk and Hawick, pedestrians stared, pointed and laughed at the weird apparition. To get the ballon off the roof into position by the house, I made a wooden plank 'bridge' but it fell off halfway down and nearly flattened me. I got out of the way just in time but it actually bounced and rolled right to where I wanted it. I had a Hawick blacksmith make me an 11 ft metal barrier but had a hard job lifting and fitting it onto a stout post I'd driven in at the top of my track.

In these first few days I realised I had seen no wildlife at all, not a single bird of any kind, but I did once look up to see a flock of redwings winging over to the west. Suddenly a far larger shape with long wings zoomed over between them, passing over my head and the house with tremendous verve and speed. A peregrine? It was twisting and turning, its long wings held half back. What a sight! It glared down at me before vanishing over the roof. I ran round to the side but there was no sign of it. It had been travelling twice as fast as the redwings and probably snatched one when out of my sight. The flock broke into two groups, one swinging back over the house before joining the main flock. I went in to check my books: surely I had seen the much rarer goshawk, bigger than the peregrine? I came out of the house and heard some barking but higher up. I looked into the sky – a V-shaped skein of whooper swans, also heading west, great long necks extended, bugling as they went. That, too, was a fine sight but I was still not seeing any birds near the house.

I was standing to attention outside during the two-minute silence on 11 November, remembering old friends in the army, when the feeling came upon me that, as much as I loved this house, the place could never truly be a 'home' to me. It seemed dead. Not one bird had come to the scraps I set out from the very first day. The forest was said to be full of roe deer but I hadn't seen a single one. It was beautiful but like an idyllic postcard, blown up and shoved outside the window. Well, I'd give it a year...

I began to feel this wild place had somehow teased me with that sighting of goshawk, redwings and whooper swans because for almost three months I saw no wild creatures at all. When the first snow fell, covering the undulating ground with a two-foot thick white shroud, my world became a deadly blue-tinged hush. I was marooned, for old Caballo could not get up the steep, slippery track, and neither could any four-wheel drive vehicle, according to the foresters. When that first snowfall melted I dashed to Hawick 18 miles away and spent £100 on tinned foods, flour and pulses, not to mention sacks of tatties and onions. There now seemed only one thing to be done – do up the place and sell it.

Every fine day I assaulted the property, wearing out three wire brushes to scrape lichens and mosses from each square inch of wall, slapping on paint until my wrists rebelled. I scraped, painted and re-puttied all the windows. I dug under long swathes of winter-dead white grasses looking for old fencing nails and stobs, finding just enough to fence the 70 yard gap on my northern boundary. Having no sledgehammer, I hefted up a big flat rock in both hands and whacked it down on the stobs to drive them in. The sheep netting I spotted, second hand, in the yard of an engineering works 30 miles away.

The roof I feared the most of all. Gales had clattered some slates to the ground and there was a leak in the attic. The chimney brickwork had broken away in places, sprouting ugly cushions of moss. One stormy night I was woken by odd clanks on the roof and two thumps on the ground. The tin chimney pot covers had blown off. Now I had to get up there. On the fine morning I chose to start, I went out to find five chaffinches on the roof's apex. Birds, at last! I was as thrilled to see those cheeky pink-breasted cocks in this bereft place as I had been to see my first golden eagle in the Highlands. So to hell with the roof today.

I had always believed that most wildlife spends most of its time foraging or hunting for food. So if you want to see any, put out the grub! My scraps hitherto had clearly not been enough. I chainsawed an 8ft slab off a fallen tree then nailed it, bark side up, across three stout posts I dug in, so that it ranged the entire length of my study window, complete with perching twigs, partial covering moss and a nut bag. I bought large bags of mixed grains, peanuts and fat balls, spreading them liberally over the bark crevices and moss of the table. It made a perfect natural-looking scene I could photograph from the warm inside of my study which by now was an improved replica of the wildlife museum I had first established at Wildernesse.

It was three days before the chaffinches dared approach, and they were followed by a cock blackbird whose 'kip kip' calls alerted me to his presence. Then one day I saw a canary on the nut bag. A closer look showed it to be a cock siskin, with blazing yellow on his chest and rump and in patches on his constantly flirting tail. Within ten days I could hardly see the table for squabbly chaffinches, counting 37 at one point. Four pairs of siskins moved in, duffing each other up with vicious beak stabs, the females often bettering the males. My old theory of putting out a lot of food was at last proving right. Then came a coal tit, a great tit and even a pair of dunnocks which crept about like mice, fast dodging the darting attacks from the finches. A flock of fieldfares moved onto my front field for a few days and as spring began the wistful songs of the willow warblers vied with the calls of the chiffchaffs, and a charm of goldfinches landed on my electricity wires, raiding the last of the dock seeds that had survived the winter. Occasionally a goshawk wheeled slowly overhead. Thrushes and blackbirds appeared from nowhere, making the morning woods ring with song. Then the tree pipits invaded my meadow, fluttering up to a height and parachuting down in courtship display, fluting a crescendo of 'see-er, see-er' notes.

Once the bird table tribes were used to my presence, I launched my attack on the roof. I was about to start cementing the chipped bricks when I heard a loud fluttering and felt a sharp pain in my left ear lobe. I turned, in time to see a cock siskin making off to the woods. It had taken umbrage at my being on the roof, so keeping it away from the nut bag. Fancy that – assaulted by a siskin! In the end these wee birds became so tame I could occasionally stroke them with a finger when they were on the nut bag.

It took many days of hard ascents (and muttered prayers each time) to replace the chimney tops, clean up, cement and paint the stacks, and replace damaged slates. After four months of work the house looked like new. Now I could surely sell at a profit and move back to the west Highlands. But when I went out to order from the blacksmith six burglar-proof metal grilles for my downstairs windows, I also rang Mr Fitzjohn, the factor at Seafield Estate who had written that the Deskford farmhouse was still for sale. I told him I had bought Ropelaw, fearing he might be peeved. Far from it! He knew Ropelaw well, had stayed in it when working as a stalker on the next door Buccleuch Estate. 'It's a super place,' he said. 'The finest wild home in Scotland!' I began to think again.

It was the eagle that changed my mind.

I had made a firm friend of Tony, the new young Forest Ranger who had knocked on my door in the first week of taking over and whose main job it was, among all his other ranger duties, to control and keep in balance the roe deer populations in the huge forest. When he had said that to him the whole essence of being out in the wild was the skill of getting close to an animal or bird so that it does not know you are there, I knew we would get along. When he added that he didn't like the

methods used by one wildlife quango body, I said ‘Put it there, pal!’ We shook hands heartily. Over the next three years we did a lot of work together, cruising the forest’s three lochs for signs of otter and pine marten, analysing the invertebrate life in the burns (using my study as a lab), experimenting with hides for owls, buzzards and goshawks, putting up nest boxes. Once we even built an osprey nest, in a tree on the biggest loch. Currently I was helping him to find occupied goshawk nests, not only for the long-term study of the bird and its needs but also so that he could inform his chief Ian, who would ban any felling or forestry work within 400 metres of the nest in the breeding season. The other purpose was to officially close-ring the chicks, so that illegal falconers could not steal them and pass them off as captive-bred birds. After long treks, necks aching from constantly squinting upwards at hundreds of trees, we located one occupied nest.

Tony felt sure that another pair inhabited a huge stand of larch three miles away and he had driven us up a long track to a high clear spot from which we could overlook the area. We were sitting in his van talking about eagles, our binoculars up on a buzzard that was wheeling in hunting circles over grassland by the larches. She gave up and glided away to our right as Tony said he had not seen any eagles since he had started. Following the buzzard, my binocular vision ended up on Tony’s out-of-focus ear! I put them down, turned to the front, and could hardly believe my eyes. There, away to my left, flying with ponderous flaps alternated with long glides and nearing the van every second, came the largest female golden eagle I had ever seen.

‘No eagles here, eh?’

‘Aye, that’s right.’

‘What’s that, then?’

Tony turned and gasped his surprise. The massive bird was now only some 40 yards above and in front of the van. We could see the eagle had big oval whiteish patches under her wings, proving that she was not fully mature. She made a wide circle and then began to sail to the west, ahead of us. Within a minute she was a mile away. We drove to the end of the track, just in time to see her disappear over a long humped ridge. We waited. A minute ticked by, then suddenly, from behind the ridge, came a big bird (but not as large as the eagle), followed by another. At first we thought they were goshawks or buzzards but they began, with hardly a wingbeat, to soar around each other. Then, like a shot from a cannon, the giant female appeared. She zoomed right up between them and as they all wheeled and turned, wings flashing in a burst of sunlight, we realised that the other two were both immature male eagles. Sighting eagles in the Borders is a rare enough event but to see three together like this was unforgettable.

We both knew of the one pair that nested in the Kielder Water area and that while they had raised a chick in the previous year, they had failed in two before that. Indeed, on first taking over the farmhouse, I had trekked into their eyrie

with a friend but had lost interest on finding that the nest was on an ugly metal contraption put up by humans, watched by the local Rangers and a fair army of volunteers from quango wildlife bodies and a raptor study group. But could any of the eagles we had just seen be the past progeny of that pair? Or could any of them be old enough to be breeding birds? The Kielder pair were nesting over the border in England that year, guarded by an SAS team, so it couldn't have been either of them we had seen.

By the end of that week we had located a second goshawk pair with eggs. At last I had worthwhile projects; trying to find any eyries of the new eagles and, especially at weekends when the foresters were away, keeping an eye on and photographing the goshawks from my 'invisible' hides. When the eagles had been seen twice more in the same area, I located the nest crags on my map, parked Caballo in a deserted quarry and, with camera pack on my back, set off. Down a steep slope to a burn I marched, a lapwing spiralling madly with 'peeowit' calls over her running chick, the triple liquid alarm calls of curlews mixing with the shrill 'kleep' cries of a pair of gaudy oystercatchers as I crossed some natural stepping stones. A slog through heather and bracken to the top of the a hill, half a mile of tussocks, another hard descent to a burn and then I was plodding my way up to the crags at nearly 1,500 feet. I stumbled on and up. There was only one ledge that could have held a nest – and it didn't.

Looking into a fold in the mountains I could see a small, dark gorge near the top, about a mile away. I knew an eagle could use such a site, so with a groan I set off again. It was hard going now, the last stretch covering steep short-heathered ground. At the head of the gorge I saw a big wall of etiolated rockface with ledges that had mossy or wood-rush covered tops. As I neared it I paused to catch my breath before the approach to the lip of the gorge.

Suddenly I heard the magic 'keeyew' call of an eaglet, only here it seemed a weaker 'keeyi'. Twice more I heard it and knowing it was a bird of prey, if not an eaglet, I started forward. A big bird hurtled towards me, zoomed over my head and gave the familiar harsh 'raich raich' calls of the peregrine falcon. She flew about above me, hollering loudly. I soon found the nest, on a tiny ledge behind a small rowan, and I could see two white downy chicks. I took a few photos then turned to leave, but not before taking advantage of the mother's wrath. I got several pictures of her flying over me, her beak open with raptor cuss-words. My hips were giving me hell by now but I left feeling triumphant. While I had not found an eagle eyrie, a peregrine's was no mean discovery.